



*The Ordained Ministry and the Missionary Task*

1962

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

(Geneva: WCC Publications, 1962)

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.



Dear John,

I have been asked to write something to you about the work of the ordained missionary overseas and I am glad to do so. I understand that you are already committed to Christian service, and that you intend to offer yourself for ordination. The question, I suppose, is now: Shall I offer for missionary service abroad? The answering of that question will depend on some ideas about the work which you might be asked to do, whether that work is urgent, and whether you are the right person to do it. It is about these things that I want to write.

We can start from the fact that the Christian Church is now planted in most parts of the world, and that anyone who goes to another country as a Christian worker will expect to be part of the fellowship of the Church there. An increasing number of Christians are in fact going to work in other countries than their own, both as missionaries serving with the Church, and also in many secular employments in which they can also play their part as members of the congregation in the places where they work. Among these will be ordained ministers serving the Church in various capacities. There is thus a variety of ways in which you can serve the Church abroad, but it is still true that the chief way in which the Churches of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Pacific get the ordained ministers from abroad who are needed for their work is through the missionary societies.

What are the grounds for considering this? Perhaps the most obvious one is the simple fact that responsible leaders in the younger Churches continue to ask for missionaries. Here, for example, is what Bishop Hospet Sumita of the Church of South India said recently in a talk on the B.B.C.:

“India still needs missionaries from Europe, for three reasons:

(1) India is not Christian. It is much less Christian even than Europe. Hardly two and a half per cent of the population can be called Christian at all. The preaching of the Gospel to the rest is more than can yet be undertaken by Indians.



(2) Those Indians who are Christians are almost all of the poorest classes – the labourers and their families, who are still virtually illiterate. The task of evangelising the rest cannot possibly be left to them, faithful though they may be in their own personal witness.

(3) The non-Christian religions in India are experiencing a marked revival, especially Hinduism and Buddhism. These religions are the profession of many of the wealthiest and most powerful people in India. Christianity must be presented to them by people who can out-think the arguments of their religions. It is romantic to suppose that the Christians of India can yet hope to make any impression on them. This is where the gifts and resources of the West can be used to greatest advantage.

That is typical of what Asian and African Church leaders are saying. You will notice that the emphasis in Bishop Sumitra's picture of the work of a missionary falls on the task of bringing the Gospel to the non-Christian. The rest of his address underlined this. "Primarily," he said, "missionaries are still required to do what their pioneering predecessors did. They must preach the Gospel to the Indians." A few years ago this was not what was being said either by younger Churchmen or by missionaries. The job of getting the Gospel over to India, it was said, is the job for the Indians. The missionary is there to help the Church and to be a symbol of the supra-national character of the Christian fellowship. The result of this way of thinking has been that the majority of ordained missionaries at the present time are engaged in work within the life of the Church—teaching, pastoral work, administration, and there are not many missionaries engaged in directly evangelistic work. This seem to be true in most parts of the world.

To-day leaders of the younger Churches – and others also – are questioning this policy. There is a greater consciousness of the fact that, in spite of the existence and growth of the younger Churches, the proportion of the world's people who confess Christ as Lord is a shrinking proportion. There are great multitudes of people to whom we are not communicating the Gospel effectively – and this includes people in all the six continents, the big secularised cities of Africa and South America, the newly developing industrial communities of Asia, the farming people of



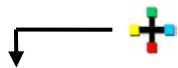
India and the Far East, not to mention the tremendous challenge of the Communist world. Faced with situations like these, the Churches are beginning to say: "Send us above all missionaries who believe the Gospel and will help us to get it across."

But is a foreigner the best person to get the Gospel across? Oddly enough, the answer is: "In certain circumstances, and on certain conditions, yes." You can probably think yourself of Asian, African or even continental European Christians who can – in certain circumstances – get the Gospel over to a British group better than a Briton could. Just because the Gospel is news, news of something that transcends our own national and cultural interests, it is sometimes the man from outside who can get it over best. But there are certain conditions. The first is that he must speak the language. I want to rub that in very hard. The missionary witness of the Church is being terribly weakened at this very time by the fact that there are too few missionaries who have taken the time and trouble really to master the languages of Asia and Africa. Some of them are difficult. If you are not prepared to face the labour of giving time – perhaps some years – to real mastery of the language, please do not offer for missionary service.

The labour is immensely rewarding. And this in at least two ways. First, it can be the way into the soul of another people, a way that enables you – foreigner as you are – to understand and love and cherish the spiritual treasures of that other people so that you can never again think of them as 'them', but always and only as 'us'. And that is the precondition of effective communication of the Gospel. Secondly, the effort to communicate the Gospel in another language is a wonderful way of entering more deeply into the meaning of the Gospel than you ever did before. This is especially true if the language is difficult, and if it has a structure which

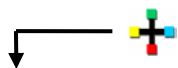
prevents you from making easy translations of catch-phrases, and compels you to think each idea through to its essential elements as a pre-condition for expressing it in the terms of the other language.

Each of these points is worth developing. Language study is part – an indispensable part – of the process of identifying yourself with the life of the people to whom you go. Much has been written about this, and there has been much experiment. There are no simple rules applicable to everyone. Standards of living, food, house, recreations are all important;



they can be a big barrier and one must do whatever is possible to keep them in their subordinate place so that they do not make fellowship difficult. Other things may be more difficult – habits of thought and conduct which offend, in respect of which one must learn to understand without necessarily approving and following. Things in the life of the Church will shock you, because we have all been brought up on a too rosy picture of the younger Churches and tend to judge them by false standards. But for all that, if you are willing to listen and learn, to accept the fellowship of the local church, to honour it as the Church of Christ in that place, you will certainly find new depths of understanding and new resources of grace that you could not have found in any other way. And you can be an effective instrument of the Gospel of reconciliation only if you speak out of the heart of the believing, worshipping, praying life of the local church. Incidentally, all this means that I hope you will seriously think in terms of life service. I know that one cannot plan for the distant future, and that much fine work can be done on a short-term basis. But for the sort of deep identification with the life of Church and people in (for example) Asia or Africa, one needs to take long views. Otherwise it will be hard to justify the investment of time in learning, listening, studying which is needed.

The other point is equally important. The Gospel is for all mankind. So long as the Church shirks the task of seeking a real meeting with the non-Christian world, we preclude ourselves from a full understanding of the Gospel. Even a little experience of working as an evangelistic missionary in India (for example) is enough to convince one that there are facets of the “manifold wisdom of God” which will be available to us only when the Gospel and Hinduism have met at a much deeper level, over a much broader front, and for a much longer time than has yet been possible. I am sure that the same is true of the other great non-Christian religions. In a very real sense the integrity and fulness of the faith requires that we be ready to seek this meeting. At present there is too much tendency for us to avoid it, to be content with inter-Church relations and, with various forms of service, but to give altogether inadequate attention and strength to the task of bringing the Gospel to those who are wholly outside the Christian fellowship. That is why I am thankful to know that you are thinking of the possibility of missionary service.



Will you pardon me if I ask what may seem to be an impertinent question? Are you thinking of teaching in a theological college? I ask that, because that was my ambition when I was in a theological college, and I have met a great many others who had the same idea. That *might* be God's plan for you, but it is a dangerous ambition at the moment. I think you can see why. It just will not do to imagine that one can really build up the life of the Churches of Asia and Africa by asking their future ministers to accept as their basic training a simple reproduction of what we learned in college in our own country. I know what it feels like to be bursting with the latest theological ideas and eager to pass them on. But the missionary task is not done that way. There has fast to be a sort of death and rebirth! One has to throw oneself and all one's theology into the life of the people to whom one goes, learn to re-think it all in their terms, to measure it against their experiences, to suffer the humiliation of being an illiterate learning the alphabet, in order to

grow into a fresh apprehension of the Faith in *their* terms, so that one can truly minister the Word to them. That requires time and faith. But there isn't any short cut.

There are specialist jobs which do not depend upon this mastery of language and thought-forms. Some of the most important are the teaching posts in schools and colleges. These can provide immensely important opportunities for Christian witness at a point of great significance. But even in these posts there is need for something of the death-and-rebirth of which I have spoken, if the missionary witness is to be really effective. In a very real sense, every missionary who hopes to communicate the Gospel to those who are outside the Christian fellowship must reproduce in his own experience something of the travail, something of the *kenosis* of the Incarnation. Remember that, when you try to preach your first sermon in Japanese, or Telugu, or Arabic!

Let me touch on one other point. If you offer for service with a missionary society you will have a double set of relationships – to the society and to the Church in the land of your service. The society recruits you and supports you; normally it places You at the disposal of the Church in the field. Some have not yet quite escaped from the old colonial patterns, and try to keep their missionaries under their own separate control; most have come to see that missionaries can do their work rightly only if

they are free to acknowledge the Church in the place where they work as the focus of spiritual authority. Some people are inclined to by-pass the missionary societies because they fear that they will be caught in the old patterns. But that really evades the question. It remains true that the best and simplest way of getting right inside the life of one of the Churches of Asia or Africa is to go as a missionary; and when you get there you will have the freedom, if you use your opportunities wisely, to take your stand against patterns that obscure the witness of the Gospel.

I have emphasised that part of the work of a missionary which is directed to the non-Christian world, because this is primary. But I hope I have made it clear that your witness will be given from within the Church of the country to which you go. You may be asked to do many jobs in the Church – teaching, training of lay-leaders, pastoral care of congregations, ministerial training, industrial evangelism, student chaplaincy, development of urban community centres, and so on. It is often hard for the Church to tell you beforehand exactly what you will be asked to do, for they will want to see you and find out where your gifts lie. But in all that you do, I hope that you will have an over-riding concern for those outside the Christian fellowship, and that you seek ways by which they may find Christ in the terms of their own ways of thought and speech. You may find that the Church is terribly introverted, and that in a short space of time you may know more about (for instance) Hinduism than any of the Indian members of the Church. You may even find that they resent your being so much interested in the non-Christians. But this is the point where your specific task as a missionary needs to be done – not to “go it alone”, leaving the Church behind, but to be a point of continual questioning to the Church itself about the whole reason for its existence. This can often be the point where it is precisely the missionary from another country who can be useful.

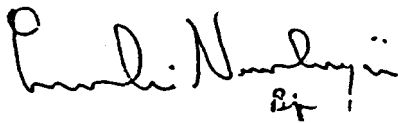
I spoke earlier about the *kenosis* which is required in a missionary. There is a further aspect of this which I think I should mention. I have said that your work will be done from within the fellowship of the Church. I am sure you will continue to be loyal to and thankful for the special inheritance of the Church to which you now belong and which sends you out. But if you go through the kind of experience of which I have spoken, if you become involved in a really

deep encounter between the Gospel and the life of people governed by another world of belief, you will find that in many ways the proportions of things will change. Some of the questions

which divide Churches in the West will begin to seem rather irrelevant. You will find other questions more urgent. You will be led to see that what you have in common with your fellow-Christian of other denominations is infinitely more important than what divides you from him. And therefore you will be led – I hope – to think increasingly of all the Christians in the place where you work as God's family, to act constantly as a member of that wider family, and to seek its peace and welfare.

If God wants you to offer for service as a missionary overseas, I am sure He will make it plain enough to you. If you are so led to serve in this way, you will surely never regret it. You will have your days of frustration, of darkness and pain. But you will have opened up to you treasures that are not accessible in any other way – rich friendships, new understanding of the Gospel, and above all the joy of seeing new colours in the spectrum of God's glory as new people turn to Christ and receive their own particular share in that glory. If I had the opportunity again, I would certainly make the same choice.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Paul Newbigin". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.